

came from that—I said, “You know, every time we have these Saint Patrick’s Day events, the Prime Minister of Ireland and all of the leaders of all the factions in Northern Ireland, they come here to the United States and they thank us for helping to promote the peace in Ireland. But the truth is, we should be thanking them because it’s the only time we can be absolutely sure there will be peace between Republicans and Democrats in the United States. When they come here, all the Irish Republicans and the Irish Democrats in the United States and all the people who claim to be Irish on Saint Patrick’s Day actually behave in a very civil and cooperative way toward one another.”

I think it’s worth remembering that when Saint Patrick came from England to Christianize Ireland, he did it without a sword, without the order of law. It was the only time in all history that a whole nation had converted without any force or bloodshed. He did it by carefully listening to the Irish people, understanding what they needed to do, how they could change, how they could not, and treating them with a profound amount of care and respect.

We pray now that the Irish people on opposite sides of this last divided peace process will heed the example of Saint Patrick and give us an even bigger celebration here next year.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Tony Blair and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Marjorie Mowlam, United Kingdom; Social Democratic and Labour Party leader John Hume; and Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble.

Statement on National Missile Defense Legislation

March 17, 1999

I am pleased that the Senate, on a bipartisan basis, included in its national missile defense (NMD) legislation two amendments that significantly change the original bill, which I strongly opposed. By specifying that any NMD deployment must be subject to the authorization and appropriations process,

the legislation now makes clear that no decision on deployment has been made. By putting the Senate on record as continuing to support negotiated reductions in strategic nuclear arms, the bill reaffirms that our missile defense policy must take into account our arms control objectives.

We are committed to meeting the growing danger that outlaw nations will develop and deploy long-range missiles that could deliver weapons of mass destruction against us and our allies. Next year we will, for the first time, determine whether to deploy a limited national missile defense against these threats, when we review the results of flight tests and other developmental efforts, consider cost estimates, and evaluate the threat. In making our determination, we will also review progress in achieving our arms control objectives, including negotiating any amendments to the ABM Treaty that may be required to accommodate a possible NMD deployment.

This week the Russian Duma took an encouraging step toward obtaining final approval of START II. We want to move ahead on the START III framework, which I negotiated with President Yeltsin in 1997, to cut Russian and U.S. arsenals 80 percent from cold war levels, while maintaining the ABM Treaty as a cornerstone of strategic stability. The changes made in the NMD bill during Senate debate ensure these crucial objectives will be fully taken into account as we pursue our NMD program.

Statement on Patients’ Rights Legislation

March 17, 1999

Today the Congress is beginning its work on patients’ rights legislation. This issue is critical to assuring Americans high quality health care in the 21st century, so I am pleased that we are moving forward.

Unfortunately, the proposal by the Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee falls far short of the legislation the American people deserve. Because it applies patients’ rights only to those in self-insured plans, this proposal leaves 120 million Americans in insured and individual

plans without the guarantee of critical protections. Millions of Americans should not be held hostage to the hope that their State might pass legislation providing these protections. In fact, while States have the authority to pass patient protections for these plans, not one has enacted all of these protections. That is why we need strong Federal legislation to ensure that all health plans provide patients these important rights.

Even for those it does cover, the Chairman's proposal leaves out many of the most fundamental protections. For example, it does not have an adequate enforcement mechanism to ensure that patients are compensated when they are injured or die as a result of a health plan's decisions; it does not assure patients access to specialists, such as oncologists or heart specialists; and it leaves our continuity of care protections. That is why every major patient, doctor, and nurse advocacy organization has concluded that this proposal is simply inadequate.

Today represents the first test of whether this new Congress is serious about providing Americans with a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights to assure high quality health care. I urge the Committee to do everything it can to pass this test and give Americans the health care protections they need.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to George J. Mitchell

March 17, 1999

The President. Well, thank you very much. I am very grateful for your warm reception. I take it you had a good time inside. [Laughter] You not only put me out of the White House, you put all of yourselves out, too, because we wanted to be here where we could sit as one, to participate in this very important ceremony.

I thank you, *Taoiseach*, Celia. I thank all the party leaders who are here: Mr. Trimble, Mr. Mallon, John Hume, Gerry Adams, all the others. I thank Mo Mowlam for her tireless work. And the members of the Irish Government who are here, I thank all of them.

Mo Mowlam has got a great sense of humor, so I'm going to tell you a story she told me upstairs, and I'll never live over it, I know. But she said one night she spent the night here with Hillary and me, and she got in rather late. We stayed up rather later speaking. And then she went to sleep, and something happened, and she had to get on the phone early in the morning, London time, which is in the middle of the night our time. And the operator called back and said that she was having trouble finding Secretary Mowlam; she was in Mr. Lincoln's bedroom. [Laughter] She said it was quite obvious the operator did not know who Mr. Lincoln was or that he had been deceased for quite some time. [Laughter] But she at least felt that she was in good company. [Laughter]

I would like to thank the members of our administration who are here and the rather astonishing number of Members of Congress who are here. I'd like to ask all the Members of the United States Congress who are here to please stand, wherever you are. [Applause] Thank you. Many have come with their spouses. Congressman King came with about 15 members of his family—[laughter]—represents about 5 percent of the total brood. [Laughter] We're delighted to see them all.

I'd also like to say a special word of welcome to Senator Mitchell and to Heather and to all of George's family and friends who are here. As all of you know, in addition to the entertainment, which we'll talk about in a moment, our primary purpose here is to give me the opportunity, in front of the Irish-American community and so many of our friends from Ireland, north and south, to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Senator George Mitchell. [Applause] Thank you.

I really don't know if this is going to mean anything to George anymore; he's gotten so many honors lately. He can't walk two blocks down any street without someone throwing some sort of trophy at him—[laughter]—Irish-American of the Year, Honorary Degree from Dublin's Trinity College. He even got an honorary knighthood from the Queen of England. George Lucas offered to give him "the Force"—[laughter]—but he said "the Force" was already with him. [Laughter]